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Interview With Frank C. Carlucci, Former Federal Official

What's Really Wrong With Government, And Who's to Blame

Inflexibility, distrust, too many over-the-shoulder watchers—all prevent bureaucrats from doing their jobs efficiently, says a long-time public servant.

Q Mr. Carlucci, is it getting more difficult for the federal government to get things done?

A Unquestionably—for reasons that spring from a growing distrust of government, the tendency of the legislative branch to proliferate large staffs and get into administrative issues, the inflexibility of the civil-service personnel system and the proliferation of over-the-shoulder watchers. There are far too many people telling government what it shouldn't be doing and not enough people encouraging government to accomplish its mission and helping it get on with the job.

Q Are government managers just not up to dealing with things these days?

A It takes a lot longer and a lot more effort to accomplish a given mission now than it did when I first entered the higher levels of government, which was about 1969. The civil-service system just doesn't always allow you to advance the most talented people or get rid of the least talented. The turnover at the higher levels of government is an enormous problem. The average tenure of an assistant secretary in one of our departments is somewhere in the neighborhood of 21 months. That's just crazy.

There is a lack of emphasis on such things as executive development and training as well as proper compensation systems to reward and encourage employees. These programs tend to get caught up in the politics of running the government. Also, government is very busy dealing with daily crises and neglects long-range planning in these areas.

Q Do you think there are too many government workers?

A No, not necessarily. In proportion to the programs that have been created, you have fewer government workers today than you had 10 or 15 years ago. The problem is not so much the number of workers but the inflexibility in moving workers from one given task to another.

Many of the constraints imposed on government are personnel-ceiling constraints—which make no sense. You have the money and the mission, but you can't hire the right people.

Q Are there too many incompetents in government—more

people in government is very high. What concerns me is that those lead people—the ones who have the experience, come up with the ideas and make the decisions—are now beginning to leave in greater numbers as they reach retirement age. I think we are starting to see a real crisis of talent in the federal government.

Q Why are they leaving? Money?

A That's a principal concern, yes. Nobody comes into government expecting to become wealthy, but they do expect to make a decent living, yet are finding it difficult to buy a home or even educate their children. I know that government salaries in Washington sound large to many, but the cost of living in this area is very high. Another problem is prospects for the future.

Q What do you mean by that?

A I mean promotions and prospects for getting public support. Public servants are becoming very tired of the drumbeat of criticism from both political parties. The bureaucrat is always the scapegoat.

When you trace back some of the impediments to getting things done by "the bureaucracy," you find it often springs from legislation or legislative history.

Q Why do college graduates want to work for the federal government?

A Basically, for idealistic reasons. They want to serve, they want to contribute and, at the entry level, salaries are reasonably competitive. At the higher clerical level they are also competitive. It's when that person reaches midlevel that he or she

encounters all the problems that I've just discussed. People in business are telling me that they're picking up a lot of talented people out of government.

Q How can the government keep talented workers?

A With a mixture of compensation, incentives, flexibility, political support and an examination of the managerial problems in government.

Q Can Congress be sold on doing something about the problems in the bureaucracy?

A Congress basically responds to public sentiment; it mirrors the public view. Unfortunately, the federal personnel problem is not a very exciting issue, because somehow government keeps going on, and it's too big and massive to change. You'd really have to arouse public concern, but I'm not optimistic that will be done.

Q What can be done about firing incompetents?

A That is a problem. There have been instances where I have tried to either fire people or move them out, and I have learned that the amount of effort you have to put forth to do it just isn't worth it. It can easily be a year-long process—very expensive in man-hours.

In theory, you can fire a government worker, but you have to document the record so carefully and there are so many routes of appeal that it is terribly time-consuming. And then there are grievance mechanisms that can be used to frustrate this process.

Q So what does an executive do in that case?

A You tend to look for ways to bypass the employee, maybe a promotion to get him or her out of the way. That



Frank C. Carlucci, president of Sears World Trade, Inc., was deputy secretary of defense, 1981-82. He previously was deputy director of the CIA and U.S. ambassador to Portugal.

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